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Family Ties: Tyler Perry Splits Time Between Chicago and Atlanta on "Meet the Browns"

The upcoming feature "Meet the Browns" revolves around Brenda (played by Angela Bassett), a single mother whose 17-year-old son and 4- and 10-year-old daughters have different fathers. Brenda and her children live in a housing project in Chicago's inner city.

The story takes a 180-degree turn after Brenda learns that the father she never knew has died in Georgia. She and her children travel south for the funeral, where they meet her family, the Browns. They are a colorful, raucous and unpredictable clan. The different environments and locations are artfully woven into the visual grammar.

"Meet the Browns" was the first collaboration for writer/director Tyler Perry and cinematographer Sandi Sissel, ASC.

Perry's latest effort is the fifth feature film co-venture for The Tyler Perry Company and Lionsgate in the last three years, with "Diary of a Mad Black Woman," "Madea's Family Reunion" and "Daddy's Little Girls" among the other titles. Perry also writes, directs and co-produces episodes of the TBS series "House of Payne."

During four weeks of pre-production, Sissel scouted locations with first AD/co-producer Roger Bobb. They planned the film's look and assembled mainly local crew in both Illinois and Georgia, with the exceptions of Steadicam operator Alec Jarnagin, from New York and Chicago-based camera operator Jody Williams, who worked both locations.

"It was the first time I've worked with Jody," Sissel says. "He's a terrific young operator who had worked with Angela before. They had already formed a wonderful working relationship. I rarely had to elaborate on the style of framing that I wanted. Jody picked up on it immediately."

"Meet the Browns" was produced in 35 mm and framed using a 1.85:1 aspect ratio. Panavision provided the camera package, including Platinum and Lightweight bodies, Primo 11:1, 4:1 and 3:1 lenses, and a set of primes.

"The day before we started shooting, Tyler got in the van with me, Roger Bobb and production designer Ina Meyhew," Sissel says. "We described to him how we planned to

block scenes with one camera on as a master shot and another covering the scene from a tighter angle.”

During the Chicago sequences, Sissel moved the camera more aggressively using longer lenses to isolate characters within the city. In Georgia, she used wider lenses in an effort to incorporate trees and houses, and to give more breathing room in the frame. Perry embraced this visual strategy.

Production took place in mid-2007 and spent 16 days filming scenes at 37 practical locations in Chicago and Atlanta. An additional 10 days were dedicated to filming scenes on interior sets built on stages in Georgia, where “House of Payne” is also produced. Sissel notes that they rarely shot longer than 12 hours a day. Sometimes, it was even nine or 10 hours.

“Perry was directing both the series and feature at the same time so his hours were limited,” notes Sissel. “This proved to be very challenging.”

Perry also played one of the Browns, his now-famous Madea character, who is a woman in her late 60s that Sissel describes as “a very wild, crazy character.” One sequence involved a car chase filmed at night with the character of Madea and without the benefit of rehearsal. Sissel covered the chase from the perspective of a Technocrane. The plan was for police to surround the car, arrest Madea, and put her in the back seat of a police car.

“Tyler improvised the scene with no camera rehearsal,” Sissel says. “He came out of the car screaming, yelling and jumping in the air until the cops wrestled him to the ground. The Technocrane operator had to react by instinct. That was typical. We would have a 400 mm lens on the camera, figuring that we would get a close-up on a face, and something totally spontaneous would happen. The Primo zooms allowed us to make fast adjustments.”

Sissel’s palette included three KODAK VISION2 stocks: 500T 5218 for scenes filmed on the sets on stage as well as for night exteriors and interiors; 250D 5205 for most day exteriors; and 50D 5201 for occasional available light exteriors where the frame was too large to silk the intensity of the Georgia sun.

Front-end lab work was done by Technicolor in Los Angeles. The lab provided high-definition DVD dailies. Every five days or so, Sissel would request 35 mm print dailies of selected scenes to give everyone a sense of how the images would play when they were projected on a big screen.

“Meet the Browns” is slated for a 2008 release by Lionsgate.